Faith & Inspiration

Substance of Sacrifice

By Vincent V. Marshburn -

The story of the Bible is the story of the Almighty God who was willing to sacrifice of himself in order to restore and redeem his creation from the tragic and corrupting effect of sin. Following the sundering of his relationship with those made in his image, God began to enact the plan which was ordained from before the beginning. His first act of intercession on our behalf was to clothe Adam and Eve with the skin of an animal (Genesis 3:21), an animal whose life was presumably forfeited for this purpose, signifying the cost which would be required to overcome the deadly consequences of human transgression.

There is every indication that the Father anticipated and understood that sacrifice would be the necessary and defining aspect of this plan of propitiation, and that the Son would need to be the ultimate substance of that sacrifice (2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:2, Ephesians 1:4-5, 1 Corinthians 2:7, 1 Peter 1:18-20, Revelation 13:8). Every aspect of Jesus's mission on Earth, from incarnation to living in obedience to the Father's will to death by crucifixion to resurrection and ascension, attests to the profound severity and amazing affirmation of God's commitment to fulfill that promise of redemption.

Jesus embraced his destiny willingly and with humility, submitting to his Father's earnest desire to restore the harmony of creation and humanity's fellowship with the Creator. Jesus faced not only the tremendous terror of excruciating physical pain and torment, but the unfathomable anguish of "becoming sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is impossible to imagine a greater sacrifice.

It may not be obvious, but one might also be moved to consider that the Father had to endure the equally distressing and grievous experience of having to send his Son to suffer the cruelty and injustice of our fallen world. God had spent millennia emphasizing the dire magnitude of sin's destructive impact. He demonstrated graphically, through ordinances of ritual offerings, that death was the final outcome of sin, knowing full well that he would ultimately be compelled to make his own conclusive offering that would fulfill the judgment and wrath mandated by humanity's capitulation to iniquity.

Inasmuch as the Son submitted to the Father in embodying the only perfect and acceptable sacrifice for sin, the Father undeniably exercised enormous grace, composure, restraint, and resolution in allowing his Son to suffer in such a manner. In some ways, this is reminiscent of when someone in a position of authority is called upon to require others to put their lives on the line – though that obviously does not quite possess the same proportion or immensity.

In an episode of the "Star Trek: The Next Generation" television series, Deanna Troi, counselor aboard the 25th-century starship USS Enterprise, is interested in taking the bridge officer's test, an exam required for those who wish to be able to fill the role of ship command when necessary (e.g., in the absence of the captain or other senior officers). First Officer William Riker offers his assistance in aiding Troi to prepare for the exam, although he warns her that he is part of the evaluation committee and thus, of course, cannot demonstrate any favoritism.

Part of the exam is a holographic simulation which presents an emergency situation involving a malfunction of the ship's primary energy storage equipment which threatens to trigger a catastrophic failure of the main energy reactor, the warp core. Based on her intensive study of the ship's technical manual and engineering protocols, Troi does her best to issue appropriate commands to prevent the simulated destruction of the Enterprise, but fails. Riker informs her that she unfortunately did not pass this part of the exam, and Troi inquires as to what she may have overlooked. Riker insists that he cannot reveal those kinds of details. Troi is frustrated and proceeds to escalate her study efforts and engage in repeated attempts at the simulation, but continues to fail to avert the disaster.

Riker informs her that, alas, she apparently does not possess the necessary traits for a command officer and therefore he must cancel the exam. He declares that his first duty is to the ship, and so he cannot allow anyone to serve in command who is not suitably qualified. Although somewhat disappointed, indignant, and resentful, after Riker leaves Troi suddenly realizes the "solution" to the exam conundrum.

She re-enters the simulation and grimly orders a crew member to repair the malfunctioning equipment directly, thereby exposing him to lethal radiation — an option she had not previously considered. Riker appears and addresses Troi.

RIKER: *End simulation. Something told me you wouldn't let this go. Congratulations. You passed.*
TROI: *That's what this was all about, wasn't it? To see if I'd order someone to their death.*
RIKER: *That's right.*
TROI: *I knew that was part of being in command and I thought I'd prepared for it, but when the moment came I hesitated. Maybe you were right. Maybe I'm not cut out for this.*
RIKER: *You did exactly what you had to do. You considered all your options, you tried every alternative, and then you made the hard choice.*

Troi comes to understand that it is one thing to sacrifice oneself when it appears there are limited options; many in positions of leadership might consider this acceptable. It is another thing to recognize that when you are responsible for the welfare and safety of others it may be necessary to sacrifice someone in your care — even someone with whom you have a deep and meaningful relationship — for the greater good. Sometimes, sacrifice means making hard choices that impact others, even those closest to us, and even fatally. While this is certainly a kind of sacrifice that demonstrates a high degree of loyalty and dedication, it is of course nowhere near the scale and scope of what God the Father committed to when he sent Jesus into our world. God's holiness demands disapproval and repudiation of sin; God's justice demands compensation and retribution for sin. At the Father's behest, Jesus became subject to all the bitterness, malice, savagery, and desperation that sin begets.

The most famous verse in the Bible summarizes this substance of sacrifice epitomizing God's grace: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ..." (John 3:16). The Father gave his Son, and the Son gave himself, motivated by measureless love for us. The manner in which we respond to this sacrifice reveals much about our own substance of character for consideration.

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